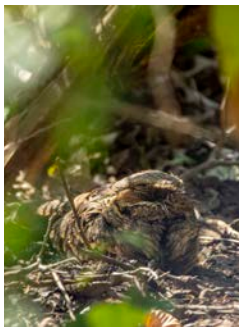
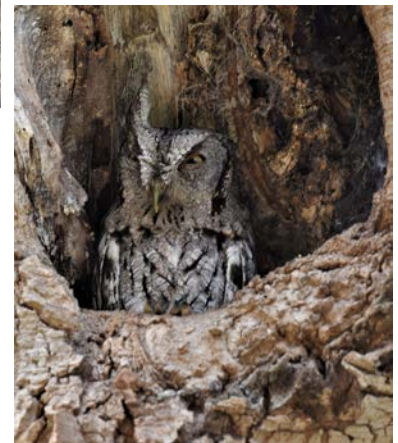


South Texas Birding & Nature

Feb. 15 – 23, 2023 | by Bryan Calk



Guided by Michael Marsden and Bryan Calk with participants Phillip, Linda, Stacey, Elaine, Elizabeth, Tim, Charles, Carolyn, Maureen, and James.



Wed., Feb. 15 Arrivals Corpus Christi | Rockport

In Corpus Christi we gathered and quickly got started with a little birding at Indian Point Park. This area might not look like much at first glance, but today in particular it was absolutely loaded with birds, including both white and dark morph Reddish Egrets, Tricolored Heron, and an assortment of ducks and shorebirds. We got to study for a while the differences between Least and Western Sandpipers and Dunlin before heading on to check-in and get settled in our accommodations at the Inn at Fulton Harbor. Before dinner, we took some time to go through orientation and our first daily checklist of the trip. Dinner was at an old favorite seafood café, over which Michael told us about the history of birding in the Rockport area and its ecological significance.

Thu., Feb. 16 Lamar Peninsula | Mustang Island

The wind had blown in strongly overnight, but we persisted despite it! South Texas weather can be surprisingly temperamental and unpredictable at times, but the birds are always there, waiting to be seen. We explored the



Lamar Peninsula first thing in the morning where we almost immediately found about a dozen Whooping Cranes enjoying their morning routine! These rare birds historically suffered from over-hunting and habitat loss, resulting in their numbers plummeting down to just 15 individuals in 1941. Luckily for us, their population has been creeping back from the brink, allowing for easy viewing on their winter grounds. It was also a treat to see several Sandhill Cranes among them for comparison. When we eventually pulled our eyes away them, we found a Crested Caracara walking around in some tall grass close to the road, allowing for some great views.

Next, we made a loop down to Mustang Island via a very short ferry where we witnessed a feeding frenzy of Brown Pelicans all slicing into the water with her bills open, along with several Atlantic Bottlenose Dolphins coming to the surface attacking the school of fish from below. Once on the island, we made our first stop at the Leonabelle Turnbull Port Aransas Birding Center. Even with a brisk breeze at our backs, we found hundreds of birds immediately upon entering the boardwalk with lots of waterfowl, a variety of wading birds, and American White Pelicans stealing the show with very close views. As we were heading out, we were even lucky enough to catch a glimpse of a Sora darting through the cattails.

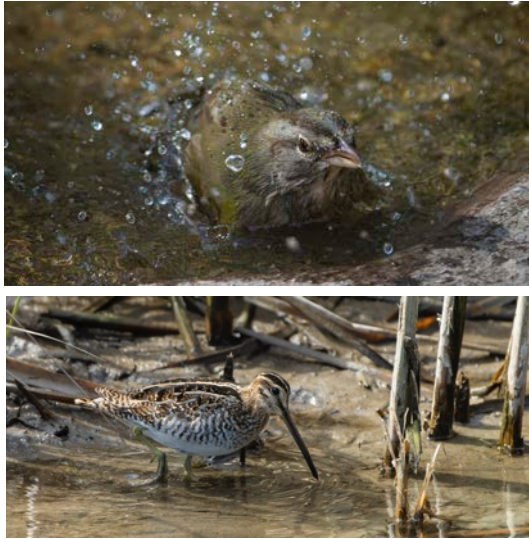
Lunch was at a local seafood dive before heading down the rest of the island with a quick stop to view an Aplomado Falcon sitting on its hacking platform along with a White-tailed Hawk that popped out of the coastal prairie. We then birded along the edge of the JFK Causeway where wetlands hosted a number of shorebirds and waterfowl hiding from the wind blowing out of the north, including a few hundred Redhead with a smattering of Red-breasted Merganser, and Semipalmated Plover and Ruddy Turnstone hiding in the debris on the shoreline.

Finally, we decided to call it a day and headed back up to Fulton before heading over to dinner at a local favorite seafood joint, with fresh fare right out of the gulf.

Fri., Feb. 17 Hazel Bazemore | Birding to the LRGV | Parrots

After quickly loading up the van, we headed over to Cape Velero Drive just outside of Rockport. This residential road traverses some exceptionally nice wetlands that this morning held plenty of birds for us, including some gorgeous Roseate Spoonbills. Along the road, an Osprey was busy eating fish, when it decided to adjust position and flew low and very close to us! Around the corner at the Live Oak Country Club, we lucked into a distant Merlin and lots of White-tailed Deer before we headed over to Calallen on the west side of Corpus Christi for lunch at a local café.

Hazel Bazemore County Park, famous for its hawk watch in the fall, is full of great birds year-round. One of the first things that we got to see, however, was a friendly Javelina that was coming in to get a drink at the bird bath! It was closely followed by our first views of several Texas specialty birds, including Green Jay, Long-billed



Thrasher, and Golden-fronted Woodpecker. We had time for one more stop on our way south, so we stopped in at the King Ranch Visitor Center where we got Curve-billed Thrasher and a group of Wild Turkeys that came trotting through. We learned a little here about the history of ranching in the region and even got to see several Santa Gertrudis cattle grazing in the pasture – a breed that was developed for the south Texas climate by the King Ranch itself.

Finally, we hit the road south to Brownsville with the skies clearing and the winds finally dying down, a good sign for things to come. Once checked in to our lodging, we decided we had just enough time to go searching for the flock of Amazon parrots that call Brownsville home. After some searching, we eventually locked in on the flock in an old Brownsville neighborhood. As we watched from the street, a local resident invited us into his own backyard to get an up-close view of the parrots settling into their roost – local hospitality at its finest. As we watched, we found lots of Red-crowned Parrots, a few White-fronted, and even a couple of Red-lored. Finally, it was time for dinner at the end of a very long day, and we treated ourselves to some Texas style barbecue.

Sat., Feb. 18 Laguna Atascosa NWR | South Padre Island

This was our last day to visit the coast, and South Padre Island sure delivered for us. On the way out, we stopped at the Zapata Memorial boat ramp. Here, a couple of Reddish Egrets were along the close shoreline showing off their unique canopy-feeding and dance-like foraging behaviors. An array of shorebirds dotted the mud flats, and we noted how low the tide had become due to the northern winds that had been blowing strong for the past couple days – the winds are the main factor in tide levels here, especially in the bays and estuaries.

Out on the island, we went straight to the South Padre Island Birding & Nature Center. The grounds and boardwalk here don't cover a very large area, yet the property supports a tremendous amount of life and diversity. We were treated right away to our first Great Kiskadees of the tour with a couple of Tropical Kingbirds right in the parking lot. Exploring the mangrove-lined boardwalk, the group found a variety of herons, egrets and shorebirds, and when we got out to the far reaches that overlooked the Laguna Madre, we were lucky enough to witness a very rare event. Like at the boat ramp, the winds had exposed expansive mud flats here that were absolutely covered in birds including resting Redheads, a variety of peeps, a few Roseate Spoonbills, Greater and Lesser Scaup, Northern Pintails, and just as we were heading back into the mangroves, we caught a brief view of a Northern Waterthrush, an uncommon winter resident here. We finished the boardwalk with the highlight being an insanely cooperative Wilson Snipe.



At the South Padre Island Convention Center flats next-door, there were dozens of Black Skimmers resting on the shore, and upwards of 50 totally adorable Piping Plovers running around together. A skirmish between a couple of Laughing Gulls over a meal one of them had scored resulted in one participant almost getting a Gulf Toadfish dropped on their head! Lunch was at a delicious local bistro on the island, after which we moved back to the mainland where we visited the Laguna Vista Nature Trail. This small community park hosts a variety of birds, and even though we only had a few minutes to spend here, we got nice views of Northern Bobwhite and Rufus Hummingbird. Finally, at Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge we managed to get some great views of Harris's Hawk along the entrance road, and at the visitor center, the blind offered us our first views of Olive Sparrow and Long-billed Thrasher, both often secretive birds. Finally, it was time to go back to the hotel and run through our checklist before dinner at a local Mexican spot.

Sun., Feb. 19 Sabal Palm Sanctuary | UTRGV Resacas

About as far south as you can go in Texas lies Sabal Palm Sanctuary, our first destination this morning. This property boasts one of the last parcels of native Sabal Palm forest in the state. Beneath the palms, the understory is full of other rare and range-restricted flora and fauna that come together to give these trails a unique and enchanting feel. The entrance road to the preserve had us cross through the border wall, and soon after we were lucky to spot a Nilgai standing at the edge of the road. These introduced antelope were brought in for hunting from Pakistan, and since then have escaped and established themselves in south Texas. We started at the visitor center, situated inside the historical Rabb plantation which served as the original owner's home built in 1892. On the trail through the forest, we encountered our first Plain Chachalacas, a coyote, Altamira Oriole, and generally enjoyed this very unique setting.

Next we headed to a delicious lunch at Lola's Bistro, situated on a beautiful resaca (oxbow lake) of the Rio Grande, and then stopped in to the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley campus. The resaca habitat here is known for hosting a variety of birds, especially in the winter. On this day, we scored both the Green and Ringed Kingfisher in the ponds, and we got to observe Anhingas catching multiple fish right below us as we watched from a foot bridge. Finally a few of us headed over to the old town cemetery where we scored a Vermilion Flycatcher before heading back to the hotel and getting some much needed downtime before our checklist and dinner.



Mon., Feb. 20

Santa Ana NWR | Estero Llano Grande State Park

Today we certainly earned our meals as we burned a lot of calories, hiking many miles through two of the valley's premier birding destinations, Estero Llano Grande State Park and Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge. We started off at Estero, walking through the wetland habitat first where we encountered American Alligator lounging out on the shore, and quite a large one at that. Above the alligator were over a dozen Yellow-crowned Night Heron, and a handful of Black-crowned mixed in. Around the corner from the aptly named Alligator Lake, we hiked up to the levee overlook of the Llano Grande, a small lake formed from the dammed Arroyo Colorado. Along the edges of the water were Stilt Sandpipers, Long-billed Dowitchers, and a handful of other shorebirds and waterfowl. Then we made our way back towards the visitor center, passing by a few ponds that held our first Least Grebe of the trip and a lone Fulvous Whistling-duck.

We made it back to the deck at the visitor center overlooking a pond with many birds wandering around where we had a quick break for some cold beverages and snacks before heading back out on the trail, but this time into the tropical zone at the park where in short order we found several Common Pauraque roosting on the ground. These cryptic nightjars can be difficult to spot, but thanks to some tips from locals we got onto them in no time. While sitting at the blind and watching the water features, a gorgeous adult Texas indigo snake came in for a drink before disappearing off into the brush once again. Next, we headed over to the Blue Onion, a Mediterranean fusion place for another tasty lunch before heading to the Alamo Inn to get checked in and drop off our bags.

Finally, we headed down to Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge for more hiking. Here, we scored a young Vermilion Flycatcher, Cinnamon Teal, and even a roosting Evening Bat inside one of the viewing blinds. After successfully wearing ourselves out (in a good way!), we called it a day and headed back to the Alamo Inn where we ran through our checklist and headed over to dinner for some hot and comforting Tex-Mex.

Tue., Feb. 21

Salineño Wildlife Preserve | Falcon State Park | Rancho Lomitas

We rose early this morning to head west to the upper limits of the lower Rio Grande Valley in Starr County. We made it out to Salineño where the sunrise was hitting the Rio Grande beautifully as we looked across it into Mexico, with a variety of waterfowl scattered across the river between us and there. We walked the river trail upstream finding osprey eating fish, Ringed Kingfishers, and Altamira Orioles. We then headed up to the feeding



stations at the Valley Land Fund preserve where we immediately happened upon an Audubon's Oriole feeding in the volunteer feeding station adjacent to the traditional feeders run by Merle and Lois. At their feeders there were hundreds of Red-winged Blackbirds, more Altamira Orioles giving stunning looks, Green Jays, Great Kiskadees, Plain Chachalacas, and more.

After soaking in these colorful birds, we then headed over to Falcon State Park with a Harris's Hawk and a couple of Crested Caracaras along the way. While we didn't find too many birds in the park, the Tamaulipan Thornscrub here is an excellent example of diversity of flora found in this ecoregion and we got great views of Falcon Reservoir. We found a nice spot to have lunch in the shade, and while we ate a Pyrrhuloxia put on a nice show for us. Then we headed out to Rancho Lomitas, a private property run by Benito and Toni where almost immediately upon arrival we got our main target bird, Scaled Quail. We continued watching the feeders as Curve-billed Thrasher, Cactus Wren, White-tipped Doves, Greater Roadrunner, and even a couple of Audubon's Orioles came in for food. A couple of us walked around the grounds which were mostly quiet, but we heard Virden and Bewick's Wren. Finally, it was time to wrap up our day with a dinner in Rio Grande City at Casa de Adobe before heading back to the Inn for a bit of celebratory buttered pecan ice cream.

Wed., Feb. 22 Bentsen RGV State Park | National Butterfly Center

Our first stop in the morning was a Bentsen Rio Grande Valley State Park, a part of the World Birding Center series of preserves here in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. The park was donated by Lloyd Bentsen's family for the preservation of this unique habitat located right along the Rio Grande. We spent most of our time here birding around the visitor center and nature center where feeders were hopping with activity, including our first great looks at Buff-bellied Hummingbird and an uncommon-in-winter Hooded Oriole. It is such a treat to get to view birds like Kiskadees and Green Jays at such close range that you do not even need binoculars, and you can observe details like the way they behave with each other and in the context of their environment.

We then hopped on the tram and took a riding tour around the rest of the park before heading back to the visitor center for lunch at a brand-new little bistro inside the visitor center with great windows for wildlife viewing. During our lunch, a Gray Hawk flew into the trees just outside and a Black-chinned Hummingbird came to a feeder a few feet from the window. Wild turkeys were entertaining as they hopped up to take peanut butter from the feeders.



Next, we headed over to the National Butterfly Center run by the North American Butterfly Association where the bird feeders were pretty active, but the highlight of our time here was certainly an Eastern Screech-Owl roosting in the cavity of a large hackberry tree hanging over the trail. The sun was making things warm, so we headed on, making stops at two small parks along the Rio Grande, first at La Lomita Chapel, and second at Anzalduas County Park. Anzalduas produced some good birding, including a Ringed Kingfisher, a Black-and-white Warbler, and one uncommon species for the valley, House Finch! We then headed back to the Alamo Inn to get packed and situated before tomorrow, our final day together. We headed out to dinner at one of McAllen's more upscale eateries, Salt New American Table. On the way there, detoured through urban McAllen where hundreds of thousands of Great-tailed Grackles congregate to roost for the evening, along with the stars of the show, a few hundred Green Parakeets.

Thu., Feb. 23

Quinta Mazatlan | Departures from McAllen

On our final day of the tour, we headed to Quinta Mazatlan for a leisurely morning of birding. Walking the grounds of this historical McAllen city park, we admired work of local artisans, read about the history of development and conservation in the valley, and of course saw nice birds. A few goodies like Lesser Goldfinch, Long-billed and Curve-billed Thrashers, and Wilson's Warbler were there to give us a LRGV farewell.

Photos: Group (Bryan Calk - BC), Black-necked Stilt (BC), Nilgai (BC), Common Pauraque (BC), Scaled Quail (BC), Altamira Oriole (BC), White-tailed Kite (BC), Eastern Screech-Owl (Greer James - GJ), American White Pelican (BC), Common Gallinule (BC), Wilson's Snipe (BC), Olive Sparrow (BC), Group on the Beach (BC), Anhinga (BC), Green Jay (BC), Juvenile Gray Hawk (BC), Ringed Kingfisher (BC), Great Kiskadee (BC), White-tailed Hawk (BC), Texas Indigo Snake (GJ), Stilt Sandpiper & Long-billed Dowitcher (BC), Eastern Screech-Owl (BC), Black-crested Titmouse (BC), Mexican Ground Squirrel (BC), Great Kiskadee (BC)